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A group in San Angelo recently restored the mezzanine and lobby of the old Cactus Hotel as their private club. Landings, entrances, and overhead glass contribute to an aura of splendor. Rich gold scroll work and fine brown murals have reappeared to look down on a chandeliered ballroom. Slate stairways underpinned in marble and bordered by polished rails reflect the elegance of the Shortgrass Country's castle.

On opening night the registration desk was turned into a bar. Upstairs, the private dining rooms along the mezzanine passageway had different arrays of cheeses and wines and fish delicacies. It was a dressed up affair. I don't cover fashion events, but I could sure tell the guests weren't wearing their work clothes.

The crowds grew and soon all I had to do was keep my elbows folded down to keep from being an obstruction. My companions moved out ahead of me. Without breaking the flow of traffic or standing in line, I found myself working on trays of appetizers that weren't any challenge for my cocktail party draw.

The serving arrangement, in fact, was so adaptable to my style that, once I learned the layout, I was picking off tea sandwiches so fast that I was unable to relocate my favorites. There wasn't one crumb of buttered toast or a filet of anchovy that wasn't on my training table. However, at a restroom break I began to notice in the mirror that salt was building up on my lips from eating so many crackers dipped in olive brine and taking on so many pretzels studded in salt granules. The best desalinize I know of is a brisk gargle of French mineral water.

On a particular Christmas I recall that the hostesses in San Angelo must have been using extra salt to try to limit the food intake at parties. Mineral water became the popular drink of that season.

Hombres who have to live off canape platters and chafing dishes develop a fast eye and a quick hand. After an old boy comes home from work about three weekends in a row to change clothes on an empty stomach and rush to a party, he'll learn to reorganize the lettuce garnishes and the slices of pate into a nourishing meal.

They stand out in a crowd of party people. Their back reach is as good as their forehand. The slight anemia from living off toothpicks gives their skin a cheddar or cream color depending on the regional preference in cocktail dips. Cocktail party anemia can be confused with the flashback of eggnog bowls that whitens the skin and reddens the pulpils of the eyes. But if you will examine the patient under strong light, punch bowl fever always shows flecks like nutmeg on the surfaces of the skin.

Toward the end of the party my thoughts began to shift from the food to the memories that old hotel holds. The proms and the banquets; the days of my youth when some of these same girls were princesses in long white evening dresses and beautiful capes. My paternal grandfather died in one of the hotel's rooms and my father stayed there when his children were born.

What a handsome meeting place it is. Those guys in the wool capital know how to show a little class and I'm all for it as long as they'll include me on their opening nights.